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Boys of Baghdad College Vie for Prime Minister

By DEXTER FILKINS DEC. 12, 2005

BAGHDAD, Iraq, Dec. 9 - The priests have long since departed, but the elite Jesuit high school called Baghdad College still looms over the swirling world of Iraqi politics.

The three Iraqi political leaders considered most likely to end up as prime minister after nationwide elections this week -- Ayad Allawi, Ahmad Chalabi and Adel Abdul Mahdi -- were schoolmates at the all-boys English-language school in the late 1950's, fortunate members of the Baghdad elite that governed Iraq until successive waves of revolution and terror swept it away.

Now, with most of Saddam Hussein's interlopers locked up and the Iraqis preparing to select a full-term Parliament, the boys of Baghdad College, now men in their 60's back from exile, are ready to assume their place on top of the social hierarchy that they and their families once assumed would be theirs forever.

The three men are now flag bearers for three very different visions of Iraq's future: Mr. Allawi for a secular state, Mr. Mahdi for an Islamic-style democracy, and Mr. Chalabi for a program that would purge Iraqi society of those associated with Mr. Hussein's rule. Hard feelings have erupted at times, in particular between Mr. Allawi and Mr. Chalabi, who struggled bitterly in the 1990's over the leadership of the Iraqi exile movement.

But what unites the three former schoolmates could prove more important than what sets them apart.

Clashing banners and personal ambitions aside, Mr. Allawi, Mr. Chalabi and Mr. Mahdi say they are ready to strike political deals that might involve tossing aside some ideological differences. Mr. Mahdi and Mr. Chalabi say they aim to form a "national unity" government with Iraq's main political leaders, presumably including Mr. Allawi. Mr. Allawi, among others, says that is highly unlikely. Even so, the ties that go back to childhood and to the musty corridors of Baghdad College suggest that the hard clashes that lie ahead in this polarized land may yet be softened by three men who grew up together.

"Ahmad was a year ahead of me, and we used to go swimming together," Mr. Allawi said. "Adel and I were friends, our families knew each other. He was a good basketball player."

"Politically we are very different now," he said. "But those were nice days then."

Indeed, many of Iraq's most prominent political leaders are linked by a network of social and familial connections that dates back generations and was largely displaced after the revolution of 1958 and the rise of Mr. Hussein's tribal-based rule.

A cousin of Mr. Allawi's father, for instance, is married to Mr. Chalabi's sister. Mr. Chalabi's father, a president of the Iraqi Senate during the Hashemite monarchy, was a colleague of Mr. Mahdi's father, who was minister of education. The father of Adnan Pachachi, himself a former foreign minister and now a parliamentary candidate in Mr. Allawi's party, was a signatory of the first Iraqi constitution with Mr. Chalabi's grandfather.

Baghdad College, established in 1931, became the secondary school where the Iraqi capital's most prominent families sent their sons. Earlier, many such families sent to their children to Victoria College in Alexandria, Egypt; Mr. Pachachi, at 82 much older than the three possible candidates, graduated from there.

Perhaps the most reliable guide to the pathways of the new Iraqi politics is the Baghdad College yearbooks from the 1950's and early 1960's, where old black and white photographs show smartly dressed boys, their faces aglow with the anticipation of success. There, for example, is Laith Kubba, now a top aide to Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafaari. And there is Kanan Makiya, the author of a landmark book about the terror of Mr. Hussein's rule and the founder of the Iraq Memory Foundation, which is dedicated to memorializing its victims.

In the Hashemite monarchy, when Iraq was still largely governed by an oligarchy, many students arrived at Baghdad College already knowing many of those around them.

"People knew each other, even though they had not met," said Harith al-Ajil, a student at Baghdad College in the 1950's and now a candidate for Parliament. "It was easy to communicate."

For men now in their 60's -- Mr. Allawi is 60, Mr. Chalabi is 61 and Mr. Mahdi is 63 -- memories of that time are sometimes hazy. And although the three men attended Baghdad College at the same time, because of their differing ages they did not attend the same classes.

But the memories are fondly held. During separate interviews last year, Mr. Chalabi and Mr. Mahdi volunteered that they had gone to high school together, and each man walked over to his bookcase to pull down his yearbook.

"Adel was always bullying us," Mr. Chalabi joked about the soft-spoken Mr. Mahdi, with whom he remains close. "Ayad was taciturn."

Mr. Allawi said he and Mr. Chalabi used to swim after school at the Alwiya Club, an exclusive social club. And he described how he and Mr. Mahdi had become politicized at Baghdad College, first with the fevers of Arab nationalism and then with the early stirrings of the Baath Party.

Mr. Allawi went on to become a hard-line Baathist enforcer, later breaking with Mr. Hussein and surviving an assassination attempt in London. Mr. Mahdi embarked on an intellectual journey that took him from the Baath Party to Maoism and finally to the moderate political Islam he embraces today.

Mr. Chalabi boasted that he had received the highest marks in school, a boast that was not disputed by Mr. Allawi or Mr. Mahdi.

"I was ahead of Chalabi, but he was so intelligent he was jumping classes," Mr. Mahdi said.

Mr. Allawi, Mr. Chalabi and Mr. Mahdi all spoke of the discipline of their Jesuit priests, who ran strict classrooms and assigned hours of homework each evening. The politicians, all three of whom are Shiite, said they were never forced to pray or attend classes on Catholicism. The student body was then about half Christian, but the Jesuits' reputation for academic rigor attracted many of Baghdad's prominent families.

But like so much else in Iraq, the cloistered world of the Jesuits was overrun by politics. The 1958 coup and the Baath Party's rise ushered in a period of violence that has not ceased. Mr. Chalabi, his father then a government minister, left the school and Iraq that year. Mr. Allawi and Mr. Mahdi joined the Baathist movement as young men but were eventually driven out of Iraq as well. Mr. Allawi was severely wounded in an assassination attempt by an ax-wielding agent of Mr. Hussein, while Mr. Mahdi was arrested, tortured and jailed.

None of the three men graduated from Baghdad College, though each later excelled in academia. Mr. Allawi went to medical school in Baghdad. Mr. Chalabi earned a doctorate in mathematics from the University of Chicago. Mr. Mahdi earned two master's degrees from universities in France.

In 1969, the Baathist government ordered the Jesuit priests deported and nationalized Baghdad College. Soon students were attending mandatory classes on the glories of Mr. Hussein and the Baath Party.

Uday and Qusay, the dictator's sons, attended the school in the 1980's, each of them terrorizing the students and staff. While most other students came to class smartly dressed, the young Qusay typically strode into class encased by a retinue of bodyguards with his shirt unbuttoned to the waist.

"Qusay was very stupid; he got a 4 percent on one of his midterm examinations," said Yacob Yusef, the headmaster.

"Uday was smarter," Mr. Yusef said. "Sometimes the teachers would answer the questions for him."

In the 1980's, Omar al-Tikriti, the son of Barzan al-Tikriti, one of Mr. Hussein's top henchmen and now on trial in Baghdad accused of mass killings, ran in an election for the students' representative to the faculty. When Omar received only two votes, his bodyguards attacked the winning student, leaving him paralyzed, Mr. Yusef said. Today, Baghdad College is becoming more its old self. The mandatory classes on Mr. Hussein are gone. The boys who enter are still among the best in the city. There is even talk of the Jesuits returning. As for politics, Mr. Allawi, Mr. Chalabi and Mr. Mahdi say that while the furies engulfing their country are serious, the best hope for containing them may lie in three old schoolmates sitting down together.

"When you have known each other that long," Mr. Chalabi said, "It takes the edge off the tension."

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Mona Mahmoud contributed reporting for this article.

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